Embassy of the United States of America

Selecting the presidential candidates

Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney addresses the 2012 Republican National Convention. © AP Images

How are presidential candidates chosen?

During the summer of a presidential election year, the Republicans and Democrats each hold a national convention where they adopt a "platform" of policies and nominate their party's candidates for president and vice president. Today, a simple majority of delegates' votes is needed to capture the nomination.

In earlier times, the conventions were exciting, with outcomes uncertain and candidates rising and falling with each ballot. Sometimes negotiations were held in "smoke-filled" hotel rooms, where cigarette- and cigar-smoking party leaders cut deals to secure their preferred candidate the required delegate votes.

Today the process is more transparent, and for about the last 60 years, each party's presidential nominee was known before its convention began.

Each state (plus the District of Columbia and several U.S. territories) is allotted a number of delegates—typically determined by the state's population but adjusted by a formula that awards bonuses for factors like whether a state voted for the party's candidate in the last presidential election. Most delegates are "pledged" to support a particular candidate, at least on the first ballot, and no convention has required more than one ballot to nominate its presidential candidate for many years.

What's the difference between a primary and a caucus?

States choose most of their delegates in primary elections, caucuses, or some combination of the two. A number of additional "superdelegates" are appointed by virtue of their positions in the party. Primaries and caucuses differ in how they are organized and who participates. And rates of participation differ widely.

Primaries: State governments fund and conduct primary elections much as they would any election: Voters go to a polling place, vote and leave. Voting is anonymous and quickly accomplished. Some states hold "closed" primaries in which only declared party members can

participate. For example, only registered Democrats can vote in a closed Democratic primary. In an open primary, all voters can participate, regardless of their party affiliation or lack of affiliation.

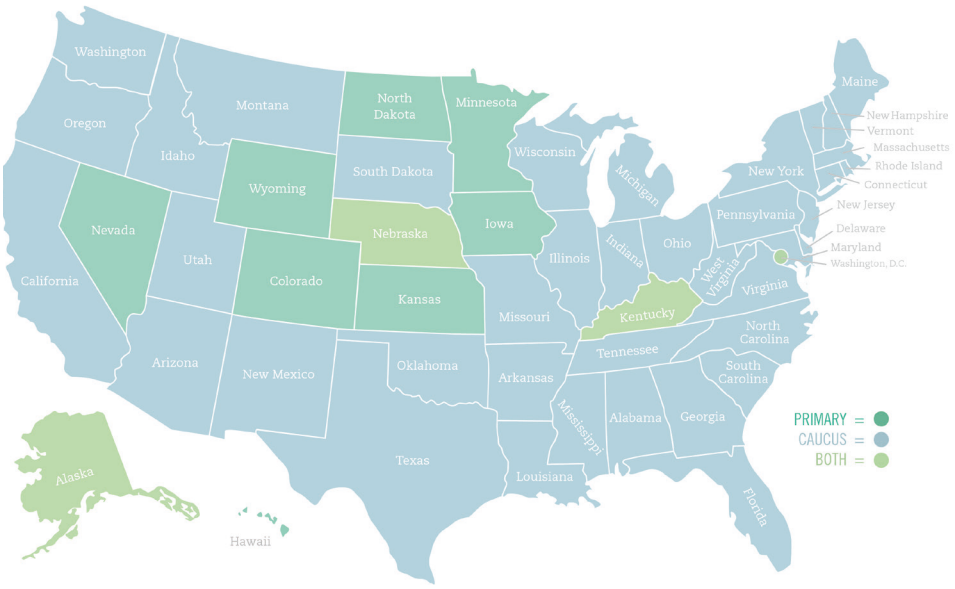
Caucuses: State political parties organize caucuses, in which faithful party members speak openly on behalf of the candidates they support for the party nomination. They are communal events in which participants vote publicly. Caucuses tend to favor candidates who have dedicated and organized supporters who can use the caucus to elect convention delegates pledged to their favored presidential candidate. Caucus participants also identify and prioritize issues they want to include in the state or national party platform. Participation in a caucus requires a high level of political engagement and time. Consequently, caucuses tend to attract fewer participants than primaries.

How many states hold a primary or a caucus and when are they held?

Historically, only a few states held presidential primaries or caucuses. But the trend has been toward greater voter participation in the presidential nomination process. The number of states holding primaries or caucuses started increasing in the 1970s. Today all 50 states and the District of Columbia have either presidential primaries or caucuses.

States choose whether they want to hold a primary or a caucus, and some states have switched from one format to the other over time.

Some states have both primaries and caucuses. For example, in Alaska and Nebraska, Republicans hold primaries while Democrats convene caucuses. In Kentucky, Democrats hold a primary and Republicans a caucus.



Each state chooses convention delegates in a primary election, a caucus, or both.

For many years, Iowa has held the first caucuses, generally in January or early February of the presidential election year, and New Hampshire the first primary, a short time later. Because these and other early contests frequently establish which candidates lack enough support to contend seriously for the presidency, candidates expend great effort in these early states, addressing their needs and interests and organizing campaigns within even smaller states, spending money on staff, media and hotels. As a result, more and more states schedule their primaries and caucuses in the winter months. Many states hold their events on the same day.

The major parties frequently tweak the rules in ways they hope will produce the strongest possible candidate. For example, in 2016, the Republicans will allow states that hold their primaries after March 15 to award their delegates "winner-take-all," so that the candidate who earns the most votes—even if it's only, say, 25 percent of the votes in an eight-candidate field—will capture all that state's delegates.

A major outcome of the proliferation and acceleration of primaries and caucuses is that the nominees of the major parties are known before the national party conventions are held in late summer. This has diminished the importance of the national nominating conventions, which have become largely ceremonial events.

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